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The Anchorman Chronicles: Geneva

By Daniel Henninger

Talking with the Russians is good.

Talking about nuclear-arms reduction is good.

I hold these truths to be self-evident, because I have been watching television. I have been watching the Talks between George Shultz and Andrei Gromyko as reported from Geneva by Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, David Hartman, Bryant Gumbel, John Chancellor and Bill Moyers. The original Gospel had four Evangelists, but arms control has seven. George Will, an unbeliever whom one expected to see stoned off the air by his colleagues, told Peter Jennings on Tuesday night that he doubted there would be another significant arms agreement "in our lifetime or our children's lifetime." But what is one man's opinion against the force of an idea? On Wednesday night, Peter Jennings offered a report on how the announcement of the resumed Talks was playing on the streets of Russia: "And from Moscow, the report of an elderly woman who said, 'I keep listening to hear it again; I have hope that my grandson will never know war.' "

On the previous evening, Dan Rather had spoken of having at last broken the "dialogue deadlock." And Bill Moyers cited as reason for Talking the "testimony of the ghosts who haunt this hall of the League of Nations," in which he was standing. (Note: Established to prevent conflict after World War I, the League fell into disuse after Japan invaded Manchuria, Italy conquered Ethiopia and Germany repudiated the Treaty of Versailles. Indeed, Hitler somewhat discredited the idea of Talking, but that was a long time ago.)

Anchorman Megawattage

Measured in anchorman watts, the Shultz-Gromyko meeting was surely the brightest showcase for TV news since the Republican convention. In fact, when word got out that all three anchormen would be doing their evening newscasts from Geneva, I thought the networks might have set the meeting up themselves. Something similar seems to have occurred to "Today's" Bryant Gumbel on Tuesday morning, when he suddenly found himself interviewing Tom Brokaw and John Chancellor, with additional dialogue by Marvin Kalb. It was quite fantastic.

"Henry Kissinger," said Gumbel, "has raised the prospect that what we're engaged in here is media hype. Marvin?"

"Well," said Kalb, in a comment that should be enshrined in the Museum of Broadcasting, "it has become a media event in the sense that there are perhaps journalists here at a loftier level than might normally be covering a diplomatic event." If this had been a cowboy movie, the barroom piano would have stopped dead. "I think," said John Chancellor, leaning in, "what we have here is an enormously important event. We are talking about the next generation of the nuclear age—weapons in space."

Then Tom Brokaw, who is, after all, the actual anchorman, practically came out of his chair to raise the ante: "The two most powerful nations in the history of civilization, with enough weaponry and enough nuclear warheads to destroy the planet, have come together in Geneva. Why shouldn't we give it all the attention we can possibly muster."

It was also a tough assignment for cameramen. The most dynamic image recorded during the meetings appears to have been Andrei Gromyko walking through a doorway, lifting off his hat and saying, "Gut bye, and best wishes to you."

This is not to suggest that the networks' huge presence in Geneva was of no value. Quite the contrary. A viewer interested in arms control, strategic issues generally or East-West relations could have obtained an extremely interesting overview during these broadcasts—but from a wholly unexpected source. The Big Three—Brokaw, Rather and Jennings—were unexceptional. They competently described the context for the meeting, and Jennings was particularly good on Europe's relations with the U.S. and the Soviets. The evening news shows also did some remarkable animations of how antimissile satellites and lasers might shoot down incoming Soviet ICBMs. Probably sold millions of people on the concept. But the really useful work was done by David Hartman of ABC's "Good Morning, America."

Hartman conducted interviews with a remarkable number of specialists on strategic and Soviet affairs, including Harold Brown, Paul Warnke, Henry Kissinger (from Hong Kong; the man must carry a beeper) Marshall Goldman, Gerard Smith and William Colby. Ideologically, this is a pretty motley crew, but their replies to Hartman were often telling and revealing.

Nobody criticized Talking; indeed, Hartman's guest list was notably lacking in a serious critic of the arms-control process, such as Sen. Steve Symms. But the qualifications and caveats piled up in drifts. Harold Brown is being widely cited now as a full opponent of the administration's missile-defense proposal, but speaking with David Hartman he sounded like a skeptic who isn't ready yet to throw in with either camp. "I'm not optimistic about the talks," he said, noting "questions of Soviet compliance with past treaties."

Hartman asked former CIA Director William Colby about "this great radar station in Krasnoyarsk, which is the size, we're told, of a football field." Colby replied that "we are looking at a system that is no strategic threat to us," adding later that we "shouldn't have our whole negotiating posture hostage to absolute verification," which is a fairly amazing posture for someone in charge of U.S. intelligence.

One of the most striking remarks Hartman elicited was from Jimmy Carter's chief SALT II negotiator, Paul Warnke, who seemed willing to write off a substantial part of the world's population if we can get an arms-control treaty. Hartman asked: "How much linkage should we demand regarding the Soviets' conduct in Afghanistan when it comes to negotiating?" "Linkage ought to be scrapped," Warnke replied. "We're in the arms-control business because it's good for us. And if it's good for us, the fact that the Soviet Union is behaving badly elsewhere should not change our determination." This has a late 1930ish ring to it, but again, that was so long ago.

After a while, I began to wonder how David Hartman was coming up with so many interesting interviews. The reason, I think, is that he approaches these big subjects essentially as an outsider looking in, as a sort of informed Everyman. I doubt that Brokaw, Rather, Jennings or nearly any of TV's specialized reporters would have asked Bill Colby about a Soviet radar "big as a football field" or dragged Afghanistan into a conversation with Paul Warnke. More likely they'd ask whatever leading-edge questions are being discussed by Washington's consensus builders, which nine times out of 10 produce noncommittal replies. They are insiders talking to insiders. Most of the time that doesn't produce very good television; the Sunday-morning interview programs have proved that for years.

Jet-Lagged Incoherence

Of course, David Hartman is a product of television, so it was inevitable that he would eventually throw up an airball like this question to national security adviser Robert McFarlane: "How have you changed in the last 48 hours?" I thought McFarlane was going to laugh in his face. In fact, by Wednesday the entire network-news effort seemed to have lapsed into jet-lagged incoherence.

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ABC's Pierre Salinger stood in the negotiating room, picked up a pencil from the table and said it had probably been used here on this very day. Dan Rather, running on fumes, asked George Shultz in a post-Talk interview: "When you were sitting in the room with Mr. Gromyko, as a person, as a human being, did you sense that you were sitting across the table from a friend and fellow inhabitant of the planet, or that you were negotiating hard and tough with an enemy?" And George Shultz replied: "We're two human beings. We act like people do. We're people, you know."

But the last word belonged to Bill Moyers, who had spent most of the two days pondering the League of Nations, the history of war, Hiroshima and whatnot. Asked by Bob Schieffer if the meeting would lead to a "warming of relations" between the U.S. and the Soviets, Moyers replied: "I don't think so, Bill (sic). I think it'd be far truer to say that the frost is still on the pumpkin, Bob, and the pumpkin is still a pumpkin and not a coach and this is not a Cinderella story."

Oh yes it is.

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